

Wanted: A fair deal for cable customers

The County Council will have an opportunity to help consumers, telecommunications and businesses that have serious ongoing customer service problems with local cable companies.

Under legislation the council will consider on Tuesday, a County Cable Commission will be created with the authority to award monetary damages to customers with complaints the cable company has failed to resolve. Currently, when consumers experience thorny customer service problems, their only option outside of the cable company's own customer service office is the County's Cable Office. And while the office's staff works hard to assist cable customers with complaints, it has been unable to satisfactorily resolve them all.

Why now? Two reasons.

First, consumer complaints against one cable company, Comcast, have soared from 288 to 482 in the third quarter of this year. In July, Comcast assured the council it had cleared up more than 800 construction violations. But an independent accounting found 500 still uncorrected. To add insult to injury, Comcast changed its accounting of customer complaints in a way that underestimates the number of calls received.

Comcast will say it anticipated this recent spike in complaints because it was converting to a new billing system. And yes, Comcast told the county in advance. The problem is, though, spikes in customer serv-

ice at Comcast have happened several times before due to such glitches, or what Comcast likes to call "hiccups."

Second, when our county is encouraging telecommuting and home-based businesses to lessen traffic congestion and when we are attempting to attract and retain businesses, Comcast's continuing service problems with its high-speed Internet service threaten to undermine these efforts. For a county as "wired" as Montgomery, this failure hurts our future economic development.

And what does Comcast do as customer complaints mount? Comcast essentially ignores the consumer and county by declining to participate in the council's Management and Fiscal Policy meetings, where we review cable customer service issues.

The county needs a way to hold cable companies accountable for customer service failures. My legislation will empower citizens to obtain redress against an unresponsive cable company by vesting quasi-judicial authority in the county's Cable Advisory Committee. This will give cable customers a forum for their complaints and an independent board the authority to assess financial damages for egregious customer service violations. The result will be empowered consumers and improved customer service from cable companies.

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